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Facilitators and Barriers Associated with Youth Player Transition to Professional First Team Football: A Key Stakeholder Perspective

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Facilitators and Barriers Associated with Youth Player Transition to Professional First Team Football: A Key Stakeholder Perspective

Abstract

The transition of elite youth footballers through academy systems towards the first team is highly complex, competitive, and often unsuccessful. A myriad of factors including technical competence, physical prowess, and the development environment combine to determine youth player progression. Current research has focussed on broad investigations of multiple clubs and stakeholders which provides a valuable overview of the key aspects associated with elite youth player transition. This study aimed to provide an in-depth, context specific investigation of key stakeholders within an elite level club in the UK. Seven key stakeholders including head of academy (n=1), head of sports science (n=1), coaches (n=3), and lead sports scientists (n=2) were recruited. Framework analysis led to the development of a practical framework outlining the key facilitators and barriers of youth to first team transition. Facilitators of transition included overcoming adversity, high-level physical prowess, exceptional technical competence, and possessing at least one elite-level attribute. Barriers to transition included, lack of opportunity, lucrative youth player contracts and a lack of development specific coaching. In addition, the developmental environment and developing individuals within a team environment were key influences of youth to first team transition. This study complements recent broad investigations of UK and global stakeholders by corroborating many of their findings whilst providing transferrable, context specific accounts of applied issues related to successful transition to first team football.

Keywords: football; talent development; transition; facilitators; barriers

Introduction

Most youth footballers in the United Kingdom fail to transition from academy level to first team [1]. Of those who succeed in progressing to the first team environment, fewer still will become established first team players over a long-term period [2]. The challenges for aspiring footballers are complex given that youth player transition is multifaceted and requires thorough, contextualised investigation [3]. In the context of professional football, a transition event in a youth footballer's career may include key moments such as signing a professional contract, being deselected, or suffering from injury [4]. This complex, multidimensional pathway is closely linked to all aspects of a footballer's life including athletic, academic, and financial wellbeing [5].

Following the adoption of systematic performance strategies (e.g., the English FA Elite Player Performance Plan - EPPP), academics have investigated multidisciplinary approaches to player performance and development. Psycho-social factors [6], physiological demands [7], technical ability [8] and tactical understanding [9] have been endorsed as key determinants of an elite youth footballer's journey towards first team football. Such research provides actionable insights about the key attributes of elite youth player performance and predictors of adult performance [10,11]. However, it is important to consider the multiple facets of talent development as overlapping and intertwined, with each player forging their own unique journey from elite youth prospect to first team professional [12]. The 'Locking Wheel Nut Model' developed by Kelly et al. [13] highlights the nuances and individualised nature of player development. This model supports profiling player competence against a range of technical, tactical, sociological physiological, and psychological metrics. Thus, generating individual plans for each player based on their unique development needs from a coaching, sports science, and psychology perspective. In addition, the Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE) [14] model and the Athlete Career Transition (ACT) model [15] have been adopted frequently within scientific literature. The ATDE model [14] provides a framework of environmental factors that influence the transition of youth athletes to senior level. The ACT [15] outlines phases within transition events where interventions may provide support to young athletes during key events in their career. These frameworks highlight the multifactorial nature of youth to senior transition in professional sport and as such, represent the theoretical constructs that this project is based upon.

Contemporary talent development research has focused mainly on younger age groups from early phase to development phase (8 – 15 years of age) [16]. Less attention has been given to senior academy (> 16 y/o) or “post academy” development and the complexities associated with the progression of players towards first team football [17]. This is problematic given the difficulties associated with transitioning to first team football from an academy setting [2]. For example, the main objective of first team football is to deliver results which is in contrast with the aims of development football. In addition, players’ experiences, needs, and environments will evolve as they progress through the academy system as they are exposed to greater pressures to perform, demonstrate progression, and secure professional contracts. In addition, external peer group pressures may become prevalent as players mature. Thus, further investigation of later-stage youth development transition is required given the increased physical, psycho-social, and technical demands [18, 19].

Research into the facilitators and barriers associated with youth transition to first team football is generally scarce. However, there are notable studies within this domain. A global, questionnaire-based study by Lundqvist et al. [20] found that practitioners and stakeholders considered a club-wide playing philosophy, exposure to various playing styles and long-term player development strategies as being key factors in youth to senior transition of elite players. As such, it could be argued that clubs should have a clear, long-term strategies to facilitate the multifaceted nature of youth to first team transition. In addition, Mitchell et al. [17] provided an insight of the perceptions of key stakeholders within academy systems on barriers associated with youth to senior transition. Findings suggested that youth players may struggle to adapt to hyper-competitive, results-driven first team environments and may experience isolation and loneliness in the early phase of transition. This is corroborated in previous literature on the stressors athletes may endure within high-performance sporting environments including obsession to win and feeling pressure to fit in to a new environment [21] and suggests that players in the early phase of youth to first team football may require individualised support and resources [12, 19]. These studies provide a perspective on youth footballer transition and promote triangulation between player, coach, and key support staff to elicit best practices within academy systems. However, the general paucity of research in this area may limit practitioner understanding of this critical phase in a youth footballers’ career [22]. Each academy environment is unique and driven by club philosophy and youth development principles [22]. In addition, organisational governance, culture, and geographic location may impact talent development strategies and be dependent on resources, finance, population

density and development philosophy [18]. As such, individual youth player transition and development is an inimitable process and not a “one size fits all” paradigm [13, 20]. Therefore, we posit in-depth, context specific single club investigations will enhance and supplement the broad findings of current research.

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of key stakeholders from an elite youth academy on the facilitators and barriers of youth player (16 – 21 years of age) transition to first team football. In addition, we aimed to develop a working framework based on the practices of the club involved in this study but with the potential to be implemented or adapted by other elite clubs and practitioners.

Methods

Positioning and Design

This project is framed within a constructionist ontology while occupying an interpretivist epistemology [24]. This philosophical position aligns with the research team’s belief that knowledge is constructed based on individual notions and interpretation of their reality and experience [25]. In addition, the research team agreed that to deliver a rich, in-depth project, the lead researcher should play an active role in the research process [26]. As such, a qualitative, investigative approach to research design was applied.

The first author was embedded within the club’s B Team (U21s) as a sports scientist as part of his Ph.D. He has ten years of professional football experience as a player and was previously part of the youth academy with the football club involved in this study for five years. Each co-author has extensive applied and research experience in elite football. To mitigate potential researcher bias, the co-authors formed a critical friend network to challenge and critique the first author’s interpretations at each stage of the data analysis process and subsequent framework development [27]. The use of critical friends is appropriate given the ontological and epistemological positions this study is framed within [27].

Context and Participants

The club involved in the study is an elite level, Scottish Premiership club and regularly compete in UEFA Champions League and UEFA Europa League competitions. Following institutional ethical approval from the University of the West of Scotland ethics committee (ref: 17531), eight key stakeholders currently working within the club's youth academy were identified as prospective participants and provided with an overview of the planned study via email. In total, seven responded and agreed to participate ($m = 7$, $f = 0$). Voluntary informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to data collection commencing. Participant roles included Head of Academy, Head of Sports Science, two lead sports scientists and three coaches across the U18's and B Team squads. All coaches (including Head of Academy) were qualified to or currently working towards their UEFA Pro Licence and had playing experience at professional level. Sports science practitioners were all educated to MSc level with over forty years' collective experience in elite youth and senior football. To protect confidentiality, participant names are replaced with numbers (P1, P2 etc.) in the results section.

Data Collection

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews [28]. Pilot interviews were conducted with a coach and sports scientist from a professional football club in the English Championship. This led to the refinement of the interview schedule and the exclusion of questions which were deemed irrelevant to the study aim [29]. Interviews lasted between 51 and 105 minutes, with 474 minutes of interview data collected in total. Data collection was conducted face to face, within private rooms at the club's stadium or training complex. All interviews were conducted by the lead author during participant free time with findings discussed at length with co-authors following each interview. ▽

Data Analysis

Framework analysis was conducted as it offered a systematic approach to framework development. This method provided researchers with a tool to investigate applied issues from the perspective of participants with first-hand experience of a specific topic [30]. We aimed to produce a working framework for the club as part of this project as opposed to a descriptive

narrative that traditional qualitative analytical methods yield [30]. As framework analysis has the potential to create actionable outcomes and has been adopted successfully in medical and psychology domains [31, 32], it was deemed appropriate for this study.

Framework analysis involved a five-stage process resulting in the development of concepts and sub-concepts from the data [29]. The five stages of framework analysis were (1) familiarisation with entire data set; (2) identifying a framework; (3) indexing codes; (4) charting and summarising, and (5) mapping and interpretation of the concepts within the framework. Familiarisation of all seven interviews was undertaken by reading each transcript and listening to audio files several times. Initial codes, notes, and ideas were recorded at this stage until the lead author felt they had arrived at a reasonable understanding of the data. The codes and notes were used to form early impressions of the data. From here, initial abstract concepts were identified to form a framework to be applied for analysis and interpretation of the data. The emergent concepts from the familiarisation phase were grouped and ranked to provide a structure which addressed the main aims of the study. Several sub-themes and components were developed and included at this part of the analysis phase. This was an iterative process which involved the lead author testing the initial framework against a test portion of the data set to refine and remove any unnecessary or duplicate concepts [30]. The research team played an active role in this process by challenging initial concepts generated by the lead author.

Following framework synthesis, it was applied to the entire data set. Linking study data and framework components was accomplished using Microsoft Excel. The indexing process involved revising and refining the framework by assessing the efficacy of the framework against the raw data. For example, sub-concepts '*Development Philosophy*' and '*Developing Champions League Players*' were collapsed into '*Environment and Development Approach*'. Following completion of the indexing phase, the data was ordered and abstracted to systematically examine it in its entirety.

Rigour

To address rigour, several trustworthiness criteria were selected based on their appropriateness for the research design. Accordingly, substantive contribution, credibility, and transparency were all built into the project [27]. This was achieved by (a) conducting novel research in an area of current literature that had not received significant attention; (b) consulting with the

research team at each phase of the data collection and analysis process for feedback and to encourage reflexivity; and (c) providing clear implications of findings as well as future research opportunities for academics and practitioners interested in elite youth player transition.

Results

A framework consisting of three key concepts with multiple sub-concepts was developed. The key concepts were: (a) attributes associated with successful youth player transition (table 1.); (b) perceived barriers and challenges to youth player transition (table 2.), and (c) environmental influences on youth player transition (table 3.). Each section of the framework is presented separately, and the concepts are supported by verbatim quotes from key stakeholders.

Table 1. Facilitators of successful youth player transition

Sub-concepts	Representative Quotations
<p>Overcoming Adversity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resilience - Mental Toughness - Experience of Adverse Events 	<p>P4: “Players that overcome an obstacle or a tough challenge in the early part of their careers will always be better off for it... every player that makes it has overcome some sort of hurdle or challenge.”</p> <p>P3: “I think it’s massive. I think it’s massive, you can see that almost every player that’s made it in the first team has had, at some point, like [<i>first team player</i>], you know, almost come close to leaving the club [<i>due to potential deselection by coaches</i>] ... so he’s used that adversity to kind of drive him on.”</p> <p>P1: “They’ve all had to show resilience, they all know what it takes to fight and get to the top. Those that have it too easy very rarely prevail.”</p> <p>P7: “...there has to be that resilience to overcome, there just has to be. It’s non- negotiable.”</p>
<p>Physical Prowess</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Speed is required of all players - Elite level endurance - Robustness to play multiple games per week - Repeated physical actions 	<p>P3: “so you need to be a multidirectional athlete, and you need to be able to produce repeated efforts. And then you have to produce those multiple times a week.”</p> <p>P2: “...you need to be able to run, you need to be able to compete... I don’t mean you need to be a six-foot giant, but you need to be able to handle yourself physically on the park.”</p> <p>P4: “You need to be quick; you need to run, to be able to press, not once, not twice, but three times... that’s part of the profile for the first team.”</p>
<p>Technical Competence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All players must be competent in possession - Must be able to receive and retain possession under extreme opposition pressure - Elite level first touch and ball control 	<p>P5: “The club has always been known for an attacking style, you know, dominating the ball... technically, I’m clear you have to have an exceptional level of technical ability to play in the first team”</p> <p>P2: “I found out that players come up to B team should be able to handle the ball... if he can’t handle the ball, then he shouldn’t be here, you know?”</p> <p>P7: “You’ve got to, as a minimum be able to play football to be here and be at a high level technically... that’s why you’re here.”</p>
<p>The ‘x-factor’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Successful youth players will possess at least one exceptional attribute - Something about their game which makes them stand out from their peer group - 10/10 quality that positively impacts their game 	<p>P3 – “I think every player needs at least one 9 out of 10 quality ... every player needs to have something in there that is a standout quality I would say”</p> <p>P4 – “To break into the first team players will probably need to have at least one 10/10 quality you know? Something that sets them apart from everyone else and that the manager can point and say, ‘that’s why I’m picking him’.”</p> <p>P5 – “They really should have something about them or something about their game that is exceptional”.</p> <p>P2 – “All the ones (youth players) who have come through here have had something special, something exceptional about their game... you definitely need that.”</p>

Players who demonstrated an ability to overcome adversity during their development in the academy were perceived as being more likely to transition to first team football. In this context, adverse events may include recovery from long-term injury, potential deselection, and loss of form or motivation. Therefore, resilience was a critical quality that stakeholders perceived to be a key facilitator of successful transition to first team football for youth players. Stakeholders considered high-level physical prowess as being another key contributing factor of successful transition to first team football. Commonalities amongst practitioners included the need for players to demonstrate robustness to compete multiple times per week and be able to dominate physical duels with opponents. In addition, the ability to perform repeated actions within a game and training consistently was cited as another key physical metric. The physical aspects of performance were important for successful transition and development and there was a consensus that young players would not transition without an ability to handle the physical demands of the game. All players who had made the transition from academy to first team football were considered to possess elite technical competence. Players in every position are expected to build attacks, to regularly retain possession and receive the ball in all areas of the pitch whilst under extreme opposition pressure. Developing technical competence is of such importance to the tactical philosophy of the club that players are expected to have developed this aspect of their game by the time they reach B team level. As such, all youth players with aspirations of transitioning to the first team are expected to meet the highest levels of technical competence. All stakeholders agreed that successful transition to first team football required players to possess at least one exceptional attribute or quality. This attribute could be physical, technical, or psychological, and should set them apart from other players within their squad. Due to the magnitude of the club and the pressure to deliver results, it was felt that without an exceptional attribute it would be difficult for youth players to impact the first team squad.

Table 2. Barriers to successful youth player transition

Sub-concepts	Representative Quotations
<p>Opportunity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunity to gain exposure to first team environment is limited - Large first team squad makes it difficult for young players to make an impact - Club has financial resources to spend millions of pounds for players 	<p>P1 – “Opportunities, you know... at the first team can be limited... there’s not a great scope for any manager to take time to bed in young players.”</p> <p>P3 – “they’re always up against it, it’s never a nice smooth transition... to get an opportunity is a massive barrier I would say.”</p> <p>P6 - “we have players in the academy squads who are trying to stand out from that crowd, and then trying to battle your way through a 30-man first team squad is a massive ask.”</p> <p>P4 – “probably opportunity... we recruit players internationally, recruit players domestically, we recruit from other academies... in 2019, we had signed 11 players in that time, so that was a full squad, that was just brought in for the first team pretty much so it’s difficult for young players.”</p>
<p>Player Contracts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Players can be rewarded with financially lucrative contracts ‘too soon’ - Long-term contracts potentially risk negatively impacting young player’s work ethic and motivation] - Young players may conflate money with success 	<p>P3: - “The financial stuff is obviously massive. Because if they get a massive reward really early in their career, then it can obviously take away a lot of that drive and a lot of that hunger.”</p> <p>P6: - “Sometimes they can get too much too soon... and that has a negative impact on them, you know?”</p> <p>P2: “they can be extrinsically motivated. So, they want the toppings of life, the good cars, the nice clothes, the good washbag... But I feel now, that, players now become wealthy without actually having made it to the first team, that’s a problem.”</p>
<p>The ‘Danger Zone’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Players who transition to first team squad or B team but do not play competitive matches regularly - Train with advanced squads but risk of missing out on development focussed training - Risk of motivation and focus being negatively impacted 	<p>P7: “Players get caught in the trap. They don’t get loan deals, they train with the first team and are barely at B team. That becomes a problem because they’re, they’re not moving, they’re standing still. So, that’s a real problem for me.”</p> <p>P2: “... player’s sometimes go up with the first team for a period of time but then they lose out on the development that comes with playing games. They’ll benefit from first team exposure for sure but in the long run... they can’t develop to the top level by just training.”</p>

Limited opportunities for youth players to gain first team exposure was a central barrier to first team transition. Stakeholders felt that managers do not have the time to allow young players the opportunity to adapt to the increased demands of first team football. In addition, the size of the first team squad only increased the difficulty for young players to make a significant impact at senior level. The club has the resources to sign players from all over the world which further impacts the opportunities of academy prospects to experience the first team environment. The financial rewards associated with some of the highly rated youth team players contracts at the club was also cited as a potential barrier to successful youth player transition. Stakeholders perceived financially lucrative contracts for young players as negatively impacting motivation and work ethic. It was deemed problematic that young players were in receipt of such financially lucrative contracts prior to any notable involvement with the first team. This is a challenge for the club as they have a track record of developing talented young players and there is an obligation to retain their services or risk losing them to rival competitors. The club may also view lucrative contracts as a long-term investment. The first team have a performance focus and not a development focus. Therefore, players in the early phase of first team transition, were at risk of falling into a developmental “Danger Zone”. This was due to players not playing competitive matches on a regular basis as well as following training schedules which typically focus on recovery and preparation as opposed to addressing specific developmental needs. As a result, young players in this ‘danger zone’ were at risk of stagnating or regressing due to a lack of attention and specific training.

Table 3. Environment and development philosophy

Sub-concepts	Representative Quotations
<p>Development Approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aim to develop Champions League players - Holistic approach to developing player and person - Players encouraged to take responsibility for development needs and training - Cultivate synergy between coaches, support staff and players 	<p>P5: "...player development is to put everything a player needs in place in every aspect of their life, and in particular football... when the player signs here at 16 years old I'll ask, 'what's going to stop you getting into the first team? What's stopping you right now? Because it ain't age!'.</p> <p>P1: "The first thing with me is the environment, that's a fancy phrase but like the culture and the environment. I'm a massive believer in you can have the best talent but if they aren't in the right environment then they'll struggle to break through."</p> <p>P2: "We want to produce Champions League players because Champion League is the pinnacle of young players as much as it's a real high point to try and achieve for us over the years."</p>
<p>Developing Individuals – Not TEAMS!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individuals with greatest potential are the priority - The team is the vehicle to support key individual development and growth - Training sessions are designed around key individuals - Players are in direct competition with one another 	<p>P1: "Ultimately, the youth players are competing against one another, you know? It's individuals who will make it, not whole teams."</p> <p>P2: "We need to push those players we think have the best chance of making it to the first team and we'll do that within a team setting. Hopefully within that we'll get one or two surprises and others will step up, but the reality is that only a small number will make the breakthrough."</p> <p>P5: "I've openly said I don't care about the team, but also the team is like a vehicle, you're the guy that's driving it, so you do need each other, you need that environment, so I very, very rarely design a session around just the team."</p>

The impact of developmental practices and the philosophy of the club in relation to supporting elite youth player transition was another important concept within the framework. The culture created by coaches and sports science staff was an important aspect of preparing and educating players on the expectations of being a first team player. In addition, the club's ambition to develop players for the highest level of club football in Europe was also a consistent motivation throughout the development process. Stakeholders believed in the practice developing individual players within a team environment. This approach acknowledges the reality that select individual players will transition to the first team and not entire squads. Therefore, most team training sessions or matchday instructions are designed around individual players who were perceived to have the best chance of progressing to the first team.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate facilitators and barriers associated with youth footballer transition to first team football from the perspective of key stakeholders currently working for an elite football club. Analysis led to the development of a working framework which consisted of 3 key concepts: *attributes associated with successful youth player transition*, *barriers to transition*, and *environment and developmental philosophy*. In this section, each concept and sub-concept are discussed in consideration of current literature in this field. In addition, potential implications for enhanced practice are offered throughout.

Facilitators of Successful Youth Player Transition

Overcoming Adversity, Physical Prowess, Technical Competence and The 'X-Factor' were the sub-concepts in this section of the framework. An athlete's journey to elite level competence in sport is rarely linear and will likely involve some form of challenge or obstacle [33]. There was a broad consensus among participants that players who are successful in progressing to the first team all possessed an ability to overcome adverse event(s) or barriers. For elite youth footballers, adversity is any event or scenario in their career that required them to display or develop high levels of resilience and mental toughness [34]. There is an argument that talent development provision in football does not cater for player needs out with performance-based metrics [35]. Consequently, young players are rarely exposed to adverse scenarios to allow them to develop resilience and mental toughness [36, 37] which may be detrimental to their progression towards first team football.

Interestingly, stakeholders suggested manufacturing obstacles and creating barriers for players to overcome during their academy journey. This aligns with work by Collins, MacNamara and McCarthy [38] who support periodised, progressive challenges preceded by specific skill development interventions as the optimal approach to manufacturing athlete resilience alongside applied competence. Stakeholders suggested creating challenges for players such as playing them in an unfamiliar position or playing at an advanced age group [39]. Further, resilience and stress exposure were key factors in the global youth to senior transition study conducted by Lundqvist et al [20] which highlights transferability between broad survey data and in-depth single club investigations.

Literature supports the notion that players with advanced physical and physiological capabilities are more likely to progress to first team football [40]. For example, speed is recognised as a discriminating factor between successful and unsuccessful elite youth footballers [41]. Research has corroborated the importance of maximal and repeated sprint-ability to performance in elite football [42,43]. Sprint distance in modern football has increased significantly over the last decade [44] due to enhanced player conditioning and the evolution of strategic and tactical principles [45]. Stakeholders highlighted that all outfield players would be required to possess high levels of speed and repeated sprint ability. This is likely due to the aggressive, high-pressing style of football that has been traditionally adopted by first team managers of the club, typically to regain possession [46]. All stakeholders were aware of the importance of speed in the modern game and the tactical style adopted by the club. Therefore, it is unsurprising that stakeholders highlighted this as a key aspect of physical performance for aspiring youth footballers.

In addition to speed, strength for central defenders, aerobic and anaerobic endurance for midfielders, and explosiveness in acceleration and deceleration for strikers were cited as desirable position-specific physical attributes. These attributes also reflect the demands of the modern game and are congruent with research in this area [47,48]. Despite consensus that physical prowess is critical to youth player development, there was a lack of specificity when considering how physical performance would impact transition to first team football. For example, for central defenders, it would be beneficial to understand what type of strength may best serve a youth footballer to optimise their development and performance (e.g., isokinetic

strength, uni-lateral limb strength). It may be useful for academy staff to examine the specificities of position-specific physical demands to inform and optimise training and development interventions. Although recent literature supports the notion that coaches perceive skill and psychological attributes to be valued higher than physical prowess [49], longitudinal studies report players who exhibit superior physical performance are more likely to be successful in transitioning to senior level football.

Technical competence has been widely researched within talent identification and development domains [50, 51]. As previously stated, the club involved in this study implement an attacking, possession-based style of football. Therefore, it is critical that players possess a high-level of technical ability. Ensuring continual development of technical and skill-based abilities is the core methodology adopted by academy coaches to develop players. This is also common amongst elite level academies [54]. Relatedly, there is an expectation from coaches and support staff that players will possess a high-level of technical ability by the time they reach U18 or B Team level. It was considered unlikely for players who have not demonstrated exceptional levels of technical ability by this stage to progress to first team level. Players technical competence is assessed using “coaches’ eye” during training and matches and thereafter reviewed in analysis sessions [55]. This allows coaches to apply their expertise and experience to identify technical strengths and deficiencies within a player’s game [56]. This is typical of elite level youth academies in the UK and is a key aspect of a young players development in the academy [57]. One method of enhancing judgement of youth player technical competence may be through skill-based assessment. Literature suggests that skill-based assessment discriminates between elite and sub-elite players [52]. Execution of skill-based actions including dribbling, passing, and shooting are considered important metrics when assessing player performance during competition [53]. However, it is uncertain whether practitioners working with this population would consider such methods as beneficial to assessing technical competence.

When referencing past and present players who had graduated from the academy to the first team, stakeholders all identified one attribute within each player which was considered elite level. These perceptions lack research or academic foundation, however, there is value in subjective, anecdotal testimonies of expert practitioners [58]. Academy staff aim to identify a physical, technical, or psychological trait within a youth players performance that may give

first team staff cause to include them in their squad. Examples included exceptional top speed, elite level resilience and exemplary passing ability. Possessing an 'x-factor' may also provide transitioning players with additional time to settle and adapt to the demands of first team football. Coaches and decision makers may be more forgiving of performance deficiencies if they have displayed an exceptional aspect of their game [17]. Further research on this notion would be welcomed to understand whether this perception is shared among other key stakeholders within elite youth academies across the UK. In addition, it would be beneficial to understand what methods practitioners adopt to ascertain what aspects of player performance are judged as elite or exceptional.

Barriers to Successful Youth Player Transition

The demands, pressures, and results driven nature of first team football is cited as being detrimental to youth player first team opportunities [17]. Research suggests first team managers are less likely to trust younger, untested players [59, 60]. The club involved in this study are expected to win every domestic game. There is an incessant pressure from supporters to win league and cup competitions every season as well as performing well in European competition. This dynamic is fuelled by their rivalry with another club whom they regularly compete with for honours. As a result, it is a significant challenge for young players to gain experience and make a sustained impact at first team level. Therefore, it is reasonable to deduce that youth players at higher-level academies may not have the same opportunities to experience first team football as those who play at a lower level [61]. Limited opportunities to demonstrate competence in a first team environment can stifle development [17]. There have been attempts by governing bodies (UEFA Technical Report, 2022) to implement criteria requiring clubs to include a minimum number of homegrown or development players within a matchday squad. This aims to provide young players with the opportunity to experience the first team environment and competitive playing time. However, the efficacy of such interventions is unknown and requires further investigation.

A young player progressing to an advanced squad (e.g., B Team to first team) may initially appear to be a progressive event in their development. However, if they are unable to make an impact within an advanced peer group, progression is at risk of plateauing due to reduced game time and individual training [62]. This risk requires careful management by academy staff to safeguard against regression of player development [36]. For context, at the time of this study, the first team squad consisted of thirty players. As a result, regular competitive game time for

transitioning players is limited, if not non-existent [17]. Playing consistently is important for players to further their development and understanding of the game [62]. In addition, there may be a lack of post academy specific training to address development needs. This was also highlighted by Mitchell et al [17] as a barrier to first team transition for youth players. Therefore, first team and academy practitioners should liaise regularly to minimise the risk of young players entering the “danger zone”. A potential solution to this problem could be utilising the loans for players at B Team level who are considered ready to sample first team football [62]. Alternatively, the creation of a specific youth to first team transition coach or practitioner may protect youth player development within the first team environment [17].

Over the past thirty years, elite football has evolved into an industry which generates billions of pounds through sponsorship, players sales, and merchandise [63]. Part of that wealth has trickled down to the players by way of lucrative long-term contracts. Ideally, youth players would sign contracts with a structured pay scale which increases periodically or following key milestones (e.g., international call ups, first team debut) [64]. In reality, elite clubs are in direct competition with one another to ensure the best young prospects remain at their clubs [65]. Therefore, clubs mitigate the risk of losing those players to rival competitors by offering lucrative contracts to secure their services. This can be problematic, with financially lucrative contracts being awarded to players without contribution at first team level. Stakeholders were concerned that motivation may be negatively impacted and that young players were conflating wealth with success. Mitchell et al [17] found similar results with key stakeholders perceiving the wealth associated with player contracts prior to reaching the first team was one of the main barriers to youth player transition. This suggests that financially lucrative contracts may impact youth player self-awareness, work ethic and motivation.

Environment and Development Philosophy

The optimal development environment included elite level coaching, player welfare, psychological support, elite facilities for first team and B team, and an elite culture and mindset towards training and performance by all staff within the academy. As highlighted in the ATDE [14] and ACT [15] models, it is important to consider a wide range of factors within an athlete’s transitional environment at a macro and micro level [20]. Without a supportive environment, the ability of football academies to produce top-level footballers is limited [66, 67]. The academy aims to provide a service for the betterment of player development. Sports science

staff highlighted the use of objective methods of assessment for physical and physiological development whilst technical and tactical ability were typically judged on a more subjective basis [66]. Integrating objective and subjective methods to assess development is representative of an effective developmental strategy [53].

Research supports holistic, player-centred approaches to talent development [69, 70]. To implement this approach effectively, it is important to consider the key predictors of adult performance as highlighted by Williams, Ford and Drust [11] (Technical, Tactical, Physical and Psycho-Sociological) as complex, intertwined domains. In addition, it is critical that such an approach is not generic or designed to address broad concepts of development [13]. Instead, development should be tailored to address the individual needs of each player. Lundqvist et al [20] highlighted the importance of long-term player development plans to successful transition to senior football. However, there was a lack of consensus among stakeholders regarding the methodologies implemented by the club to ensure long-term development. For example, the desire to produce players to compete in the UEFA Champions League was cited as being the main aim of the club, as it is widely regarded as being the pinnacle of club football [71]. Greater clarity on this philosophy could enhance academy practices and synergy between multidisciplinary teams.

To optimise the development of individual players with the greatest potential of transitioning to first team football, coaches and support staff must tailor team training sessions accordingly [72]. This is achieved by designing sessions around the development needs of a particular player(s) [73]. Ultimately, all players will benefit from the session however, the main objective is to develop one or two select individuals [72]. Adopting this approach allows coaches to nurture and facilitate the development of key individuals [74]. Prioritising individual players over team success aligns with the purpose of academy football, which is to produce players capable of contributing to first team success [75].

Dowling et al [72] investigated developing individuals by using the team as a vehicle and found that coaches had different perceptions of how to achieve this. There were conflicting opinions between stakeholders on the developmental priorities of late-stage youth players (e.g., winning vs development). In contrast, the stakeholders in this study provided a broad consensus that utilising the team dynamic to optimise select individual development was an appropriate strategy in their pursuit of providing players for the first team.

Limitations

This study is representative of practitioners from a single elite level soccer club in the Scottish Premiership. As such, the possibility of generalising the findings may be limited. Investigating several clubs across the top tiers of soccer in the UK may yield commonalities that practitioners and researchers can further explore and implement. It should be noted, however, that many of the findings within this study concur with broader investigations within current literature [17, 20]. As every club will have unique challenges, philosophies, playing styles and resources, further investigation of individual club practice in relation to youth to first team transition is warranted.

Conclusion

We have presented a novel framework of youth to first team transition from the perspective of practitioners within an elite level academy. The importance of overcoming adversity and developing resilience as well as elite level physical prowess and technical ability were considered as critical for successful youth player transition. Major barriers to transition included opportunity to gain exposure to first team football, player contracts, and a lack of development focus following progression to the first team. Developmental environment, club philosophy and prioritising individual players within a team environment were also highlighted as key factors that influence successful transition to first team football. We support the need for research on youth to first team transition and call for further club specific investigations to increase our understanding of the multiple challenges and complex issues clubs experience in their pursuit of developing elite, first team footballers.

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